DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SECTION

DPI/NGO/SB/91/7

CHALLENGES OF THE CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 21 February, 1991, Dr. Noel J. Brown, Director of the Regional Office for North America, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), briefed NGO representatives on the challenges of the convention on climate change.

On February 4, the United Nations sponsored the first negotiating session for a Convention on Climate Change and Global Warming, held in Washington D.C. Mr. Brown said that the 70 degrees Fahrenheit temperature in February was a reminder of how humanity could disrupt without fully understanding how to undo the damage. Disturbance of the natural order of balances that took millions of years to establish is at stake. He quoted James Lovelock:

> When Archaian life began, about four billion years ago,
> the sun was 30 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than it is today,
> yet the average temperature of the earth's surface
> has remained within the critical life-supporting range of
> 58 - 68 degrees Fahrenheit, even during the ice ages.

Mr. Lovelock has also pointed out that for the past 200 million years nature has maintained oxygen levels at an ideal 21 per cent. However, Mr. Brown warned that if the oxygen level should vary by so much as a few points, life as we know it would end. This is the prospect facing humanity and the challenge tackled at the February Conference. The task of the Conference was to do what in the past nature did at no cost; to design mechanisms to maintain essential balances in the natural order.

Mr. Brown stressed that we need to act with a sense of urgency. He cited Dr. Mostafa Tolba, Executive Director of UNEP, who has stated that we will "win or lose that struggle to protect the earth's climate in the first years of the 1990s." Saying that a sense of urgency is not widespread, Mr. Brown stressed that this is not due to a lack of warnings.

READEX FICHE

For years scientists have warned that if present trends continue in fossil fuels use and deforestation, build-up of greenhouse gases, such as methane and nitrous oxide will continue. The global temperature is likely to change by between one and four degrees Centigrade in the next 30 to 50 years. The consequences are unpredictable, according to Mr. Brown.

If temperature continues to change as projected, the consequences will be severe, Mr. Brown said. Hurricanes will be more frequent and increased aridisation will lead to the erosion of yet more topsoil. The affect of the rising sea level on coastal economies due to the melting of global caps will be severe. The Maldive Islands are likely to disappear; Bangladesh would lose about 40 per cent of its territory and the deltic rice growing regions of Asia would be affected. Climate changes would also result in new rainfall patterns and water vapor migration, as well as vegetation migration.

The above concerns led to the convening in June 1988 at Toronto of a Global Conference on Atmosphere and Global Security. The Conference established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, (IPCC). Two and a half years later, the IPCC released a 1200 page report which was used in the Washington, D.C. Conference in February, 1991. One of the report's findings was that a 60 per cent reduction in emissions from human activities is required if climate change is to be prevented.

Mr. Brown said the Washington, D.C. Conference had organizational rather than substantive results. A fund financing participation of developing countries received a $1.5 million donation. Nevertheless, only 15 African countries were represented at the Conference, and most of them by embassy staff rather than climate change experts. An organizing mechanism was established to manage the negotiating process. One crucial question raised was how many governments are prepared to commit themselves to setting targets for reducing emissions. Canada, Australia and the European Community said that they are willing to consider a target of 20 per cent. The United States appears to be unwilling to consider a target in advance.

According to M. Brown, the Conference had provided a framework and an agenda. What is needed is the political will. Non-governmental organizations can help the United Nations and the efforts to control climate by creating the demand for the changes needed.

During the question and answer period following the briefing, Mr. Brown emphasized the hope that UNEP would encourage research into alternative cost-effective and non-polluting forms of energy, including water, wind, solar and nuclear. He stressed the important contribution the First Global Congress of the Earth (to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992) would make towards this research.

In response to a question about the consequences on the environment of mining in the Antarctica, Mr. Brown replied that the General Assembly has requested a report on the state of the Antarctic environment as well as a report on the feasability of having a United Nations research station in the Antarctic. One question which needs further research, he said, is the effect increased ultra-violet rays may have on the plankton, the base of the food chain.